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ABSTRACT

The Congressional Research Service, founded in 1914, is staffed by 542 research specialists who provide information services solely to the legislative function of the United States Government. The Congressional Reference Division and seven subject divisions--American Law Division, Economic Division, Education and Public Welfare Division, Environmental and Natural Resources Policy Division, Foreign Affairs Defense Division, Government Division, and the Science Policy Research Division--are available for inquiry. Additionally, the Language Services Section is available for foreign language translations, and a library services division maintains a retrospective filing system of previous research to aid subject specialists and minimize the time length of searches. CRS services are available to any member of Congress or staff assistant seeking information, and currently support 2,000 inquiries per day. The report details the operations of these services and discusses some of the difficulties and limitations faced by CRS. (RAA)

Report No. 78-229 D

THE CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE OF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS

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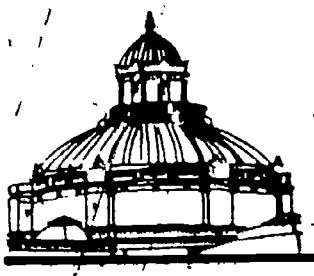

CRS

July 1, 1976

Updated November 8, 1978

The Congressional Research Service works exclusively for the Congress, conducting research, analyzing legislation, and providing information at the request of committees, Members, and their staffs.

The Service makes such research available, without partisan bias, in many forms including studies, reports, compilations, digests, and background briefings. Upon request, CRS assists committees in analyzing legislative proposals and issues, and in assessing the possible effects of these proposals and their alternatives. The Service's senior specialists and subject analysts are also available for personal consultations in their respective fields of expertise.

Summary

This report presents a brief overview of the organization and functions of the Congressional Research Service and its research and information activities in support of the Congress. More detailed information on the budget, staffing, and workload of the Service appears in its annual report to the Joint Committee on the Library.

THE CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE OF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS [1/]

Like every other legislative body in the world, the American Congress frets over its inability to secure the information it needs to govern wisely. Its Members know the distress of all legislators over the increasing number of decisions to be made, each concerning matters of the utmost complexity and usally involving highly technical, intricately related courses of action. The frustrations of inadequate information are severe enough in the parliamentary form of government where at least the majority party is the "government". They are doubly magnified in the tripartite structure of the United States where the separation of powers is spelled out by the Constitution and jealously guarded by each successive generation of lawmakers. Here, where the increasing amount of legislation is generated by the executive branch (itself five hundred times larger than the legislative, and represented in every community in the land), the Congress is asked to approve or reject, pass or modify, increase or limit thousands of the most complicated pieces of legislation without the equivalent of the bureaucracy available to the President. Congress refuses to yield its legislative role to the Executive, but it must

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1/ From "Library Services to the Legislature; a symposium", prepared at the request of the New South Wales Parliamentary Library, Sydney, Australia. All statistics and organizational material revised as of November 8, 1978.

struggle constantly to retain some degree of parity in the information sources of technical competence on which its judgment will be based. It cannot hope to match the number of specialists available to the President and the executive departments, but it does attempt to equal them in the quality of the expertise which it builds into its congressional offices and committee staffs, and into its Congressional Research Service.

The Congressional Research Service (the "CRS" as it is known in the congressional establishment) was founded in 1914 and has since grown steadily in staff and in the demands Congress has made upon it. In the fiscal year ending September 30, 1978, the Service responded to more than 300,000 congressional inquiries. The answers were provided by its 542 research specialists, supported by an additional 314 clerical and administrative personnel. An "inquiry" -- which statistically is a single stroke -- may be as simple as a question on the population of California or as complex as a study of the possible ways to provide medical care to the aged. The one required a few seconds by a researcher; the other occupied three analysts for a period of six months.

The development of such a research organization followed a path similar to that experienced by many of the governments of the West. In 1800, the Congress created a small working library to assist itself in governing the Nation. The Library grew in scope throughout the years until its collections became so great they were, in fact, The National Library, and by the early 1900's the Library staff had become so involved in the complexities of operating a general research institution that the Congress felt the

need for a special department of the Library which would concentrate solely on matters of legislative interest.

Through the years of trial and error, plus the ever-present need for more and more specialized knowledge, the Service has reached its present form of organization. It now attempts to house a diversity of subject specialists who match the spectrum of congressional needs. Its professionals are all college graduates, the majority with advanced degrees. They provide services solely to the Congress (i.e., no work is done for the executive, the judiciary, or directly for the public), and they work closely with congressional Members and staffs as legislation is developed in each subject field.

Some feeling of the scope of the expertise available can be seen in the method by which an inquiry is assigned to one of the seven subject divisions of the Service.

When a request or query is made of the CRS, the staff of its Inquiry Recording Unit first asks the question, "Is this of such nature that the answer is purely factual? Will it appear in a book, in a previously prepared CRS report, or in one of the Service's information files?" If so, the inquiry is sent immediately to the Congressional Reference Division where a group of 64 reference and information specialists will respond to the inquiry. Working from a typical public library reference collection and the Service's materials on national affairs, this division handles in excess of 192,000 inquiries a year. Fifty percent of these are answered either "while the asker waits" or during the day of their receipt; ninety percent are answered within twenty-four hours.

If, on the other hand, the incoming inquiry is of such nature that it will require the preparation of a report, the projection of statistics, the analysis of the pros and cons of an issue, or any subject-oriented research, it will be sent to one of the research divisions. These, noted alphabetically with a very short statement of their prime obligations, demonstrate the spectrum of specializations from which the recorder will choose:

The American Law Division has 47 staff attorneys who deal with the legal aspects of all public policy issues, with special expertise in such fields as election law, international law, tax law, conflicts of interest, congressional ethics, civil rights, Indian law, environmental law, antitrust, criminal law, parliamentary law, admnistrative law, and the rights, privileges, and immunities of Members of Congress. The Division also prepares such continuing publications as the "Digest of Public General Bills", the "Federal-State Election Law Survey", and the "Constitution of the United States, Analysis and Interpretation."

The staff of the Economics Division includes 58 researchers whose skills and background cover the fields of money and banking, international trade, industrial organization, labor, communications, housing, urban development, transportation, and commerce.

The Education and Public Welfare Division's 54 researchers serve in the fields of social security, public health, crime, immigration, veterans affairs, welfare, and education.

The Environmental and Natural Resources Policy Division has 36 professionals and is concerned with the governmental role in water resources, agriculture, mining, forestry, energy resources, oceans, and air and water pollution.

The Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division has 56 research staff members arranged in a miniature State Department of "desks" - a Western European, Latin American, Southeast Asian, etc., with separate sections for Regional Issues, Global Issues, and Policy Management Issues.

The Government Division, with 53 research employees, is divided into six principal sections: one provides information on Congress; the second deals with executive branch organization and administration; the third covers government operations and personnel; the fourth pursues research in the areas of civil rights and equal opportunity; the fifth responds to inquiries concerning politics, history, and territories; and the sixth is concerned with planning, development, and survey research.

The Science Policy Research Division aids Congress in the evaluation of Federal programs relating to space, atomic energy, oceanography, computer technology, research in medicine and the life sciences, and government support of scientific development and professional education. The division has 33 scientists on its staff.

The Language Services Section of the Office of Assignment, Reference, and Special Services provides foreign language translations to the Congress (1,530 in 1978 involving 18 different languages).

Finally, distributed throughout the Service are the Senior Specialist positions. Their role and subject specialization are described by statute, and the positions are filled with nationally recognized experts who, as a rule, have published widely and have had extensive careers outside the CRS - either in government, on the campus, or in private business. Frequently their experience has been in all three areas. The Senior Specialists positions cover the following fields: Agriculture, American Government and Public Administration, American Public Law, Conservation and Energy, Education, Engineering and Public Works, Environmental Policy, Futures, Housing, Income Maintenance, International Affairs, International Economics, Labor, Life Sciences, Mineral and Regulatory Economics, National Defense, Ocean Policy, Price Economics, Public Administration, Science and Technology, Social Welfare, Soviet Economics, Soviet Affairs, Space and Transportation Technology, Taxation and Fiscal Policy, and Transportation.

With the exception of the Senior Specialists, each subject division is organized in a comparable manner. At the top will be the Chief of the Division, who will be a senior analyst with both a broad experience background in the field of the division's responsibility (e.g., a general economist, an attorney, a scientist, etc.), as well as a specialist in some particular aspect of the division's work (e.g., an expert in corporate finance, a specialist in torts, an oceanographer, etc.). The Chief will be supported by an Assistant Chief (who is skilled in one of the division's subject specialties), an administrative secretary, and from six to ten typists, depending on the size of the division and its workload.

Within the division's specialized staff will be vertical responsibilities. For example, in the field of housing, the Service has five persons. The Housing Senior Specialist will prepare the highest level of studies bearing on legislative problems, will assist with committee hearings, and provide consultative service as requested. The others in the unit will be housing economists with advanced professional degrees who will provide specialized assistance. At peak workload in the spring, an apprentice or generalist in the field (probably only recently graduated with a baccalaureate degree) will frequently be added on a temporary basis to handle the less sophisticated requests. There will be several such units in each division, carrying in sum, the total divisional subject responsibility.

A Member of Congress or staff assistant wishing to make an inquiry of the CRS phones a single number which automatically places the call with one of sixteen full-time inquiry recorders. This person conducts the interview with the inquirer, determines what the question is, records the inquiry, and passes the request to the unit supervisor, the Coordinator of Research. The Coordinator, on the basis of the subject involved, the known workload of the divisions, the expertise of the personnel available, etc., assigns the inquiry to a specific subject division. Here, the appropriate Division Chief considers the skills and workload of that division s staff, and assigns the inquiry to a researcher. The researcher proceeds to answer the inquiry using techniques to be explained below, and returns the reply to the Chief. The Chief approves or modifies the response, and the reply is sent

to the congressional office. In this manner, over half of all CRS inquiries are answered within the day they are received. The Service is currently receiving in excess of 2,000 calls a day during the legislative session.

Such speed and quantity does not imply (hopefully) a superficial response, but rather one that was anticipated and one for which the mechanics of research had already been reduced to a minimum. This is achieved by eliminating the majority of the usual steps in a research project: searching the literature on the subject, accumulating the material for the inquirer. The Congressional Research Service attempts to minimize these labors through the use of its Library Services Division, made up of 21 professional librarians and 50 paraprofessional and clerical assistants. These specialists maintain a massive filing system into which all the past research of the Service is arranged by subject and preserved, into which the contents of nine daily newspapers are classified and filed each day, and into which 4,000 magazines are clipped and filed as cuttings. This content, plus the addition of enormous quantities of documents and pamphlets from the Nation's governmental and lobby presses, results in a system which brings together in a single spot some 3,000 different subjects, each arranged chronologically and available for instant use. The specialist can then begin immediately on a summary or analysis, or -- if the literature is sufficient in itself -- can employ the various photocopying devices in the Service to copy and forward the material to the Member at once.

Similarly, when a topic is generating general legislative interest, one of the earliest inquiries received on the subject is answered with a summary of the problem, a description of past governmental activities, and alternative solutions for the future. This reply will then be duplicated in quantities from 350 to as many as 5,000 copies in anticipation of further inquiries. Such stockpiling and storage, of course, permits faster response.

To restate these alternatives, a researcher may answer a congressional inquiry in a great number of ways, each depending on what is most appropriate to the subject matter and which will be most useful to the Member. The form and nature of the Service's assistance must be geared to its intended purpose. Given the same subject matter, the response will vary considerably if the end result is to be published as a committee print, if it is to be used in examining witnesses at a committee hearing, if it is to brief a Member prior to an appearance before a committee, to be used in floor debate, or if it is to form a part of an address to be given in the home district. Thus the researcher may elect to reply to the question simply by telephoning the answer to the Member, drawing on personal knowledge of the subject. The answer may be found in one of the Library of Congress 18 million volumes and photocopied, abstracted, or loaned to the congressional office. A written report, analysis, or survey may be prepared or the factual portions of an address drafted. A kit of material from duplicate copies of reports, documents, or photocopied articles may be assembled. Or the researcher may go personally to the inquiring Member or committee and consult with them on the matter --

and such a consultation can be as short as a conversation or as long as a series of hearings extending through the greater part of the legislative session.

In addition to such individually tailored replies, the Service provides continuing tools which assist the Members with the daily flow of legislation. It prepares a "Digest of Public General Bills" which identifies each new piece of legislation introduced in either House. The "Bill Digest" provides an abstract of each bill, keeps track of the status of its progress through the Congress, keeps a list of bills by the names of the Members who introduce them, and contains an index of the legislation by subject.

A second legislative aid, "Major Legislation of the Congress" appears monthly and traces only the 600-700 most active pieces of legislation. It identifies committee activity, amendments, and the progress of these major bills and provides the Public Law number, when enacted.

Finally, the Service sends each Member each month a list of the major studies done by the Service, so the congressional offices can know what has been newly prepared and what is currently stockpiled in the CRS on major congressional issues. At any one time, over a thousand such studies are in print and available.

During the past 60 years, the mission and purpose of the Service has progressed through three rather clear-cut stages which may be of interest to other legislative support organizations. From 1914 to 1946, the then Legislative Reference Service (LRS) was essentially a library operation with a librarian staff,

primarily committed to the location and transmittal of data - reference work. This was used increasingly by the Congress and became an accepted source of legislative information support.

The enormous demands placed on Government by World War II and the post-war and reconstruction period demonstrated congressional need for much greater subject expertise so that, in the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, additional staff with increased specialization was made available to Members' personal staffs and given to the LRS. The LRS was instructed to act as a pool of expertise and told to bring together staff trained in specific areas which could be drawn on by both Members and committees. The results of the 1946 Act were to shift the predominant staff from librarians to subject specialists and to add pro and con studies, comparative analyses, and subject-oriented reports to continued information support.

Twenty years after the Legislative Reorganization Act, the Congress again re-examined its informational needs, and in a new Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 greatly enlarged the LRS's mandate and mission. During the hearings on the Act and ultimately in the final report, it was made clear that the new instructions were based on three premises: I. In order for Congress to sustain its constitutional role and maintain any kind of parity with the executive and judicial branches, it must have adequate information. II. The information must come from a legislative source, detached, objective, without a cause to sell. III. Congress should have direct access to its own separate research agency, staffed with a pool of independent subject experts.

From this came an endorsement of the purpose and procedures developed under the 1946 Act and four changes or extensions in previous instructions.

First, superficially trivial but representing the whole thrust of the new plan, the Legislative Reference Service name was changed to that of the Congressional Research Service. Legislative could be State; congressional was solely Federal. Reference implied identifying it in stored material; research implied bringing skilled thought to bear on the meaning of the information found. The requirements of in-depth policy analysis were spelled out.

Second, the new Service's obligations to committees were underscored. Now, by law, the Service was to maintain continuous liaison with all committee memberships and staffs. At the beginning of each new Congress it was to provide each committee with a list of all the programs and activities falling under each committee's jurisdiction which were due to expire during the coming sessions. Similarly, at the opening of each Congress, the Service was to identify policy areas which each committee might profitably consider in the coming months. In so many words, the CRS was to assist committees with the analysis and evaluation of legislative proposals, to help them in determining the advisability of such proposals by "estimating the probable results...and of alternatives to them," and to evaluate "alternative methods of accomplishing the goals of such proposals."

Third, the Service was instructed to prepare "purpose and effect reports on any legislative measures which were scheduled for hearings." These were to be descriptions of "relevant measures...

previously introduced in the Congress and a recitation of all action taken theretofore by or within the Congress" relative to the measure.

Fourth and finally, the Act directed the Librarian of Congress to "encourage and assist the Service in performing its work, and to grant it complete research independence and the maximum administrative independence." The CRS is presently implementing these directives, and both new staff and new procedures are being brought to bear to achieve their intent.

In general, the system works well, and the steady and uninterrupted growth of the demands made on the Service seems to attest to its usefulness to the Congress. Nevertheless, it has its limitations and its problems.

The most obvious difficulty is one shared by any successful governmental activity. In the case of the more serious research studies, there is rarely enough time or staff to provide the quality of answer the staff is capable of doing. The demands made on the Service rise every year at a far greater rate than is possible to provide researchers to cope with them. In the 30 years between 1947 and 1977, the annual receipt of inquiries had risen 1,190 percent, while the staff had increased only 517 percent.

Similarly, the constant struggle to secure effective communication between the legislators and the CRS specialists will be recognized by anyone dealing in public information services. What does the Member really need? How can the Service respond most effectively? Does it -- or indeed does the Member -- really understand what is required? All these problems seem to be universal.

By the same token, the concept of legislative research has its limitations. It must not be forced beyond its legitimate role. The Congressional Research Service is not an investigative agency. Investigation must be limited to the committees of the Legislature.

The Service does not and should not recommend courses of action. It endeavors to identify such choices and to the best of its ability, attempts to state the apparent strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives -- but it must be the legislator who makes the decision. The Service takes no position regarding which is the better solution to a dilemma, and a researcher who attempts to plead a cause is inappropriate to our staff.

Similarly, the corollary to the above limitations must be total absence of partisanship. We will do no research on the political activity of another Member of the Legislature; our staff members, while expected to take part in the professional activities of their speciality, must not engage in advocacy of one side or the other of a public issue. The Service then sees itself as the agent of the Legislature in securing and transmitting information -- hopefully identifying truth to the best of its ability -- from which the members of the Legislature will make decisions of action. It endeavors to preserve its good name so the representation of all parties can say on the floors of the Congress, "The Congressional Research Service says..." and at least that part of the debate will meet with a minimum of challenge. The near impossibility of this state is self-evident, but the struggle to maintain it is the most potent force in the high motivation and dedication of CRS staff.